The Hound of the Baskervilles

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

About the author

Arthur Conan Doyle was born on 22 May, 1859 in Edinburgh, Scotland. He studied at Edinburgh University and became a doctor.

Conan Doyle, like Holmes, had very acute powers of observation. He had a very practical mind but also a great imagination. He developed an interest in spiritualism while he was a doctor in Southsea, joined the Society for Psychical Research and for nearly 30 years carried out a series of experiments in telepathy and spiritual investigations. Finally, at the peak of his literary career, he wrote two books on spiritualism – The New Revelation and The Vital Message. Conan Doyle rather resented the success of his Sherlock Holmes books, feeling that they overshadowed his more important historical and scientific books. This was never more apparent than when he gave a lecture on spiritualism in Amsterdam shortly before his death in 1930. Ignoring the lecture’s title, many of the questions from the audience were about Sherlock Holmes. Conan Doyle refused to answer them and told the audience he had nothing more to say about the detective or his cases.

Summary

The Hound of the Baskervilles is one of Conan Doyle’s most famous mysteries featuring the detective, Sherlock Holmes, and his friend, Dr Watson. The eerie mists of Dartmoor form the setting to the sinister events at Baskerville Hall. When Sir Charles Baskerville is found dead, the people living in the neighbouring area are sure that he didn’t die from natural causes. Strange sightings of a giant fire-breathing hound and stories from the past have convinced them of this.

The new heir to the property, Sir Henry Baskerville, arrives from Canada determined not to let the stories frighten him away from his new home. He braves the loneliness of the moors, takes pleasure in getting to know his neighbours, and is careful to follow the advice and guidance of the great detective, Holmes.

Holmes and Watson slowly unravel a tangle of mystery as the case takes them deep into the heart of the Baskerville family.

Chapter 1: Dr Mortimer pays Sherlock Holmes a second visit with the excuse that he left his walking stick behind the day before. The real reason is that he has a serious problem to solve.

Chapter 2: Dr Mortimer presents Holmes and Watson with some old papers, which tell the Baskerville Story. In order to recapture the girl who had escaped Hugo Baskerville’s trap, he made a deal with the devil and sent his hounds to chase the girl. Hugo’s friends followed him only to find both the girl’s and Hugo’s bodies lying in the centre of a hollow. A large black hound was biting at Hugo’s throat. Ever since the supernatural hound has haunted the family and it is believed that Sir Charles Baskerville, the latest inhabitant of the Hall, has just been killed by the hound.

Chapter 3: Holmes asks Dr Mortimer for more details and the doctor suggests that Sir Charles’s death was the result of some supernatural evil. The local people themselves have seen a spectral hound roaming the moors. Dr Mortimer is mainly concerned about the fate of Sir Henry, Sir Charles’s second brother’s son, who is arriving at Waterloo that day. Sir Henry is said to be the last of the Baskerville family because Roger, Sir Charles’s third brother, is presumed dead in Central America. Holmes promises to consider the matter and asks Dr Mortimer to pick up Henry at the station. Holmes decides they must examine all explanations, not only the supernatural one.

Chapter 4: Sir Henry Baskerville visits Holmes and tells him about a letter he has received in which he is warned to keep away from the moor. The other unusual thing that has happened to Sir Henry is that one of his new boots has disappeared. Holmes considers it will soon appear. He also concludes that the person who wrote the letter is an educated person who reads The Times. Sir Henry and Dr Mortimer walk back to the hotel and Holmes and Watson follow them. They find out that a bearded man is following them in a cab.
Chapter 5: Holmes and Watson meet Sir Henry at his hotel. He is furious because an old black boot of his has disappeared. Over lunch they decide when Sir Henry will travel to Baskerville Hall and as Holmes cannot accompany him, Watson will be going with him.

Chapter 6: When they get near Baskerville Hall Sir Henry, Dr Mortimer and Watson see a soldier. A dangerous prisoner has escaped from Princetown and is hiding in the moor.

Chapter 7: Dr Watson meets Mr Stapleton near the Grimpen Mire. He tells him how dangerous the Mire is. Dr Watson hears a low cry followed by a deep roar: the Hound of Baskervilles according to the local people. Miss Stapleton mistakes Watson for Sir Henry and warns him not to stay there but go back to London right away. Watson is shocked.

Chapter 8: Watson writes a letter to Holmes to tell him about Sir Henry’s interest in Miss Stapleton. He also tells Holmes about Mrs Barrymore, a sad-looking lady, probably badly treated by her husband.

Chapter 9: Sir Henry wants to go for a walk on his own. Watson follows him and witnesses a strange scene between Sir Henry, Miss and Mr Stapleton. Sir Henry has proposed marriage to Miss Stapleton but her brother has reacted rudely. Later Mr Stapleton apologises. Sir Henry and Watson find out that the escaped prisoner is Mrs Barrymore’s brother and they go into the moor to catch him.

Chapter 10: Barrymore reveals that on the night of his death, Sir Charles was going to meet a woman at the gate: Laura Lyons. After her husband left her, Dr Mortimer, Stapleton and Sir Charles helped her start a business. Watson learns that another man lives on the moor.

Chapter 11: Laura Lyons explains she wanted money from Sir Charles to buy her freedom but she never met him because she got the money from someone else. Watson inspects the huts on the moor but hides when he hears the stranger coming. The man has found him.

Chapter 12: Holmes surprises Watson in the empty hut. They share the information they have found: Stapleton’s sister is actually his wife. They hear the cry again and follow the sound only to find Selden’s dead body in a pool of blood dressed in Sir Henry’s old clothes. Stapleton appears, worried about Sir Henry. They suspect the naturalist is connected to the murders but they cannot prove it yet.

Chapter 13: Holmes notices the family paintings and discovers Hugo’s face is the same as Stapleton’s: he is a Baskerville. Holmes has a plan: Henry must visit Stapleton on his own as agreed, and express his intention of walking back home. Mrs Lyons confesses that Stapleton promised marriage if she wrote the letter to Sir Charles but then asked her not to keep the appointment. They meet Lestrade at the station.

Chapter 14: The three men wait outside Stapleton’s house. When Henry walks out, a huge fierce fire-breathing creature jumps on him but it is shot down. Sir Henry is safe. They also find Mrs Stapleton tied up in a room. Stapleton runs to the Mire and is swallowed by the mud.

Chapter 15: Holmes gives a detailed account of how he solved the case.

The original text
Written in 1902, The Hound of the Baskervilles is one of the best-known tales of Sherlock Holmes. Doyle was inspired to write the story after hearing a West Country legend, and the resulting novel is rather more gothic than other Holmes stories. As in all Sherlock Holmes stories, the solution to the mystery is found through Holmes’s observation of tiny details. As Holmes says to Watson, ‘The world is full of clear things which nobody notices.’

Background and themes
Good and evil: Doyle shows good and evil in permanent opposition to each other throughout the ages. Evil is shown to be stronger in the hours of darkness. ‘Dark’ is a word that is constantly used to describe Baskerville Hall and Dartmoor. The feeling of menace created through the descriptions of the hall and the moors contrasts sharply with the warm cosiness of Baker Street. Conan Doyle builds the tension in the novel through mysterious happenings, unexplained noises, menacing weather, and eccentric characters who clearly have something to hide.

Natural and supernatural: The solutions to the Sherlock Holmes mysteries are reached through reason and, perhaps because of Conan Doyle’s interest in the supernatural, there is often an air of the unexplained and macabre about them.
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Discussion activities

Before reading

1 Group work: Divide the class into groups. Ask groups what the front cover of the reader is trying to say about the book and how well it does this. Make sure they think about the style of the letters as well as the picture. What does the cover tell them about the plot or the themes? Write the main points on the board.

2 Discuss: Ask the students to work in pairs. They read the information about The Hound of the Baskervilles in the Introduction and discuss the following: What secrets could the people Watson meets at Baskerville Hall have? Why could the newly arrived Sir Henry Baskerville be in danger? Do you believe that ghostly hounds exist out in the moors?

Then get them to share their views.

3 Group work: Ask the students to work in groups. They read the information about Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in the Introduction. Then, they answer the following questions:
   a What nationality was Conan Doyle?
   b What was his first job?
   c How old was he when he became a full time author?
   d Why did he go to South Africa?
   e Where were Conan Doyle’s short stories about Sherlock Holmes first published?
   f What other types of book did Conan Doyle write?
   g How did the death of his son affect him?
   h When did Conan Doyle die? How old was he?

Chapters 1–3

While reading

4 Pair work: (p. 1) On the first page of the book, Holmes says to Watson, ‘Now is the moment of fate, Watson, when you hear on the stairs a step which is walking into your life, whether for good or for evil.’ How does this sentence set the mood (atmosphere) of the book? Now talk to another student. Do you agree with each other?

5 Discuss: Have students work in pairs. Have them write down all the things in these chapters that seem to be unusual or unnatural. Can you think of a way to explain any of these events? Then get each pair to share their views with the rest of the class.

6 Role play: (pp. 5–7) Ask students to play the role of two local people talking about Sir Charles’s death. Student A: You believe in the Baskerville curse and try to explain the series of events before Sir Charles’s death as if it was the result of the powers of evil. Student B: You don’t believe the Baskerville curse and try to explain the series of events leading to Sir Charles’s death from a scientific viewpoint.

After reading

7 Discuss: Put students into pairs. Get them to discuss the following questions:
   a Why were the Baskervilles warned never to cross the moor during the hours of darkness (1742 statement)?
   b What did Sir Charles do to win the respect of all who had any dealings with him?
   c Who stated that Sir Charles’s health had been bad for some time?
   d Why didn’t Dr Mortimer recognise Sir Charles at first?
   e Why does Holmes suppose that Sir Charles ran down the Avenue?

8 Discuss: Get students to answer the following questions: Dr Mortimer thinks that Sir Charles’s mind was prepared for such a death as he suffered. Why does he say so? In what ways was he prepared?

Chapters 4–6

Before reading

9 Discuss: Ask students to discuss the following: What will happen to Sir Henry in London? And at Baskerville Hall?

While reading

10 Discuss: (pp. 13–14) Get the students in groups. Ask them to discuss the following: What clues does Holmes follow to explain why Sir Henry in London? And at Baskerville Hall?

11 Pair work: Get the students to work in pairs. Ask them to speculate why Holmes believes that the new brown missing boot is a useless thing to steal and why he considers that it will soon be found. Then get them to share their views with the rest of the class.

After reading

12 Discuss: Get students to answer the following: Have you learnt anything in these chapters that may help solve the mystery? If so, make a note of it.

13 Role play: Get the students to work with a partner. They are Watson and Holmes. Watson describes to Holmes how he felt when he first saw Baskerville Hall and the surrounding moors. Holmes asks him questions to make him explain the details.

14 Write: Get the students to imagine they are Watson. After dinner he goes into his bedroom and writes an entry in his diary about his first evening at Baskerville Hall.

Chapters 7–9

Before reading

15 Predict: Ask students to predict what will happen next: Who do you think was crying in the middle of the night? Why was that person crying? What information will Watson get from the Barrymores? What information will Watson get from the Baskervilles’ neighbours?
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While reading
16 Discuss: (p. 28) Put students into pairs. They discuss the following questions:
   Do you think that Sir Henry is in danger at Baskerville Hall? Do you think Miss Stapleton wants to help Sir Henry? What about Mr. Stapleton? Do you like the book so far? Why/why not? Then get them to share their views.

17 Write: (p. 28) Get the students to imagine they are Watson writing a new entry in his diary. This time he writes about Mr and Miss Stapleton. Watson shows surprise at the fact that educated people live in such an inhospitable place as the moor, etc.

18 Discuss: (p. 31) Sir Henry tells Watson: 'The whole neighbourhood seems to have watched!' Ask the students to reflect upon the following questions: Why does Sir Henry say so? How does he feel about what happened in the moor?

19 Role play: (pp. 31–32) Get the students to imagine the conversation held by Mr Stapleton, Miss Stapleton and Sir Henry the moment Sir Henry draws Miss Stapleton to his side.

After reading
20 Discuss: Sir Henry and Watson go out into the moor to catch Selden, the prisoner. Ask the students to get into two groups. One group considers it is their duty to catch the man because he is a danger to society, a criminal. The other group thinks it is not a good idea to go into the moor 'when the Powers of Evil are at their strongest'. Each group makes its case, trying to persuade the other group to take their own side.

21 Pair work: Put students into pairs. Get them to discuss the following questions:
   a. Why did a false step in the Mire mean death at that time of the year?
   b. Who did Miss Stapleton think Dr Watson was when she first met him?
   c. What made life happy in the moor to Mr Stapleton?
   d. Why did Sir Henry want to go out alone?
   e. Why did Sir Henry think Mr Stapleton appeared to be mad?
   f. Why did Dr Watson and Sir Henry hear footsteps in the passage?
   g. Why did Mrs Barrymore take Selden, the prisoner, in and feed him?
   h. How did Sir Henry and Dr Watson reach the place where the prisoner was hiding?
   i. Describe the prisoner.
   j. Why was Sir Henry upset by the mysterious cry he heard the night he and Dr Watson went out to catch the prisoner? Then get them to share their views with the rest of the class.

Chapters 10–12
Before reading
22 Discuss: Watson has requested the presence of Holmes. Will Holmes go immediately? Why? Get students to speculate whether Holmes will come to the Hall or stay in London waiting for some signal from Dr Watson.

While reading
23 Group work and discuss: (after p. 36) Watson writes to Holmes: 'I have a feeling of danger all the time – a danger all the more terrible because I cannot describe it.' Ask students to work in groups and answer this question. Then get them to share their views with the rest of the class.

24 Write: (after p. 36) Ask students to make notes to answer Watson's questions at the bottom of the page. Then they compare notes with a partner.

25 Pair work: (after Chapter 11) Ask students to get into pairs and choose one of these characters: Laura Lyons and Mr. Stapleton. Then write the following words on the board:
   cunning  sad  wild
   pretty deceitful  desperate
   happy  patient  anxious
   kind

   Ask each pair to choose three words that best describe their character. They must justify their choices.

26 Discuss: Ask students to discuss the following: How do you think Laura Lyons will help Holmes and Watson discover the truth? Why will she want to help them?

27 Guess: (after reading Chapter 11) Ask students to guess who the man in the moor could be.

After reading
28 Group work: Ask student in groups to find a way of proving Holmes's suppositions.

Chapters 13–15
Before reading
29 Predict: Ask students to work in pairs. They read the titles of the last chapters and try to anticipate the end of the novel.

While reading
30 Discuss: (after Chapter 13) Ask students to think of ways in which Lestrade can help solve the case. Then they share views.

31 Role play: (after the first part on p. 59) Mrs Stapleton is the victim of her husband’s violence. She seeks advice from Dr Mortimer about her situation. Ask students in pairs to role play the conversation.
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32 Discuss: (p. 62) Write on the board what Holmes says:
‘The stranger and more meaningless an event seems, the more closely it should be considered.’
Discuss the meaning of this statement. Divide the students into small groups and give each group a different situation. For example, someone has committed a murder; someone is having an affair, etc. Each group writes down some ‘strange and meaningless’ things that might happen in these situations, which might show that the person is guilty.

After reading
33 Group work: (after Chapter 15) Ask students in groups to write down as many facts as they remember about the events that Holmes discovered. Then they compare their list against the details in the chapter.
34 Discuss: Put students into pairs. Get them to discuss the following questions: Which of the characters was the most helpful to solve the case? Which is more important to solve a case: guesses or facts? Why are the moors so relevant to this story? Could it have taken place anywhere else? Justify your answers.

Vocabulary activities
For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.